The Effects of the Indian Caste System: A Case Study

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Abstract: People in India are traditionally socially differentiated along a number of characteristics, including class, religion, geography, tribe, gender, and language. One of these categories is the Indian Caste System. Even while all human cultures engage in some type of differentiation, it becomes problematic when one or more of these factors overlap and serve as the only criteria for systematic ranking and uneven access to valuable resources like wealth, income, power, and status. Given that the Indian Caste System is a closed system of stratification, a person's social standing is determined by the caste they were born into. As previously indicated, a caste name typically corresponds to a particular occupation and is a closed stratification, making it endogamous. The caste system in India is a division of people into four castes, known as varnas, based on hierarchy. Hinduism served as the foundation of the purity-pollution complex and had a significant impact on the Indian population's way of life and worldview. Indians still struggle with caste consciousness even 63 years after gaining their independence. Traditionally, closed communities divided by caste, creed, and language have allowed India to continue to exist as a nation for millennia. Each person was assigned a specific work from birth, and heredity of vocation was a rule that greatly influenced the economy of both urban and rural life.
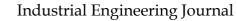
Key Words: Caste System, occupation, religion, varna, society.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Indian Caste System is historically one of the main dimensions where people in India are socially differentiated through class, religion, region, tribe, gender, and language. Although this or other forms of differentiation exist in all human societies, it becomes a problem when one or more of these dimensions overlap each other and become the sole basis of systematic ranking and unequal access to valued resources like wealth, income, power and prestige. The Indian Caste System is considered a closed system of stratification, which means that a person's social status is obligated to which caste they were born into. There are limits on interaction and behavior with people from another social status . Its history is massively related to one of the prominent religions in India, Hinduism, and has been altered in many ways during the Buddhist revolution and under British rule. This paper will be exploring the various aspects of the Indian caste system related to its hierarchy, its history, and its impact today.

Caste Structure and Characteristics

Defining the word "caste" itself is harder than thought to be. Risley defines it as "a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community". It can also be defined as an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank of social esteem in comparison with other such subdivisions. Caste name is generally associated with a specific occupation and, as mentioned before, is a closed stratification, which makes it endogamous. The Indian caste system is a classification of people into four hierarchically ranked castes called varnas. They are classified according to occupation and determine access to wealth, power, and privilege. Leadership positions in society are monopolized by a few dominant castes. The two upper castes are ritually considered as superior to the lower castes. The Brahmans, usually priests and scholars, are at the top. Brian K. Smith, the author of Classifying the Universe, explains his definition of the Brahman caste:.The Brahmin class is essentially defined by its
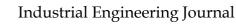
were bound by Holy Scriptures to govern their kingdoms with justice. A Hindu ruler was the protector of his subjects, and in order to protect his subjects the king needed to be an expert warrior. A Kshatriya is characterized by physical and martial strength. These qualities determined his relations with others: "the Kshatriya is charged with the protection of the higher Brahmin class with rule over the lower Vaishyas". The word 'kshatra' in Sanskrit means government, power, and dominion. Kshatriyas are considered to be bold, alert and full of fortitude, generosity, discipline and modesty. Priests and warriors were said to be "better" than or "superior" to the other castes, and in general the Brahmans and Kshatriyas were regarded as united into a ruling class according to the populace at large. But although the Brahmans and Kshatriyas together proclaimed to be superior to the commoners, the Brahmans never hesitated to declare their own caste as higher than the Kshatriyas. The reason of this, according to the Vedas, is that Brahmans have been characterized as being self-sufficient, whereas the Kshatriyas are dependent on priests. Thus, it is said that Brahmans can live without rulers, but rulers cannot sufficiently execute their tasks without the aid of Brahmans. Next are the Vaishyas, or merchants. A Vaishya's duty was to ensure the community's prosperity through agriculture, cattle rearing and trade. The Vaishyas were considered and expected to be weak in comparison to their rulers, and were infinitely exploitable and regenerative. These oppressions however, were usually not boycotted because this was presented as a natural state of affairs in the social realm . Later, the Shudras took over agriculture and cattle rearing while the Vaishyas became traders and merchants. However though they were "twice-born" and economically strong because they controlled commerce, Vaishyas were denied a high social status, for which they resented the upper castes.
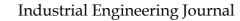
Caste includes three elements: repulsion, hierarchy, and hereditary specialization. According to Velassery, "a society is characterized by such a system if it is divided into a large number of hereditarily specialized groups, which are hierarchically superposed and mutually opposed. It does not tolerate the principle of rising in the status of groups' mixture and of changing occupation" . There are many rules in the Indian caste system which caste members must adhere to in order to avoid being shunned from their caste members or, according to Hinduism, being born less fortunate in their next life. The two most important characteristics of the Indian caste system have to do with endogamy and occupational restriction. Every member of a caste or sub-caste is required to marry within their own caste. Any violation of this results in excommunication from one's family and caste. When it comes to occupation, every caste is associated with a particular one to which its members are required to follow. Another characteristic is that every caste imposes restrictions on its members with regards to diet and has its own laws which govern the food habit of the members. There are two types of food: Pacca, which is food prepared with ghee, and Kachcha, which is food prepared with water. According to the castes, only certain kinds of foods can be exchanged between certain castes. For example, a Brahman can accept only Pacca food from a Shudra, but Kachcha food can only be accepted from a person of one's own caste or of a higher caste . Another is the social interaction between castes. There are strict barriers when it comes to the mixing of a superior caste with an inferior caste. Hence, under the caste system every caste abides by well established customs and well defined norms of interactions. A fourth idea is the belief of purity and pollution. Cleanliness is considered to be a very important value in Hinduism, and the caste system enforces this idea. Untouchability was thus a means of exclusivism, a social device that became religious only by being drawn into the pollution-purity complex. Therefore, it was believed that the higher castes were more pure and less polluted, while the lower castes were regarded as less pure and more polluted. A final characteristic that is very important to the stabilization of the Indian caste system is the restriction of caste mobility, which was mentioned earlier. Birth in a particular caste confines a person to staying in this caste and restricts and individual's mobility up or down the hierarchy. The caste system very much impacted the economic structure in the Indian village. The village was essentially a food-providing unit, where each family of the craft or service caste was linked with one or more of the land owning-farmer-caste family. This system was known as the jajmani system, which survived in India up to the arrival of the British. W.H. Wiser in his Hindu Jajmani System shows the mutuality of relationship in a village community based on the exchange of goods and services between different castes. In the village that Wiser studied, he found that "there were twenty-four castes fixed by birth—priest and teacher, bard and geologist, accountant, goldsmith, florist vegetable grower, rice grower, carpenter, ironworker, barber, water-bearer, shepherd, grain parcher, seamster, potter trademan, oil-presser, washerman, mat-maker, leather worker, sweeper and cess pool cleaner, Mohammedan beggar,
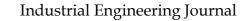
the web of economic stability and security that was provided by an individual's respective caste and by those relationships the individual acquired through his or her occupation was essential to village live. The caste system is what drives these relationships and these relationships are one of the reasons the caste system stays intact. Origins and History The origin of the Indian caste system has many theories behind it. Some of them are religious, while others are biological. The religious theories explain that according to the Rig Veda, which is the ancient Hindu book, the primal man, Purush, destroyed himself to create a human society and the different parts of his body created the four different varnas. The Brahmins were from his head, the Kshatriyas from his hands, the Vaishyas from his thighs, and the Shudras from his feet. The Varna hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which the Varnas were created .For example, Brahmans, who were derived from the head of Purush, are considered the intelligent and most powerful varna because of their wisdom and education and are a representation of the brain. In the same way, Kshatriyas, considered the warrior caste, were created by arms, which represent strength. Another religious theory claims that the Varnas were created from the body organs of Brahma, who is the creator of the world in Hinduism. The biological theory claims that all existing things inherit three one of three categories of qualities. Varna means different shades of texture or color and represents mental temper. In Hindu religious stories, there are many wars between the good Aryans and the dark-skinned demons. Stories of demon women trying to seduce good Aryan men in deceptive ways are very prominent. Many believed that these incidences really occurred in which the Gods and the positive heroes were of Aryan origin and the demons were in fact the original residents of India who the Aryans themselves coined as devils and demons. As most of the societies in the world, India had a patriarchal system. Most of the time, the son inherited his father's profession, which led to developing families, who acquired the same family profession for generations. Later on, as these families got bigger, they were seen as communities, or jat. Different families who professed the same profession developed social relations between them and organized as a jat. After a while, the Aryans who had created the caste system slowly began to add non-Aryans to their statuses. Different jats were integrated into the various varnas according to their profession. Other foreign invaders of ancient India—Greeks, Huns, Scythains, and others—conquered parts of India and created kingdoms. These were integrated with the Kshatriyas. Most of the communities that were in India before the arrival of the Aryans were categorized with the Shudras or were made outcasts depending on their occupations. The beginning of the Dalit varna began here, where the communities exercising polluting professions were made outcastes and considered as "untouchables." Brahmans are very strict about cleanliness, and in the past people believed that diseases could be spread not only through physical touch but through the air as well. This is one of the reasons why Dalits were not allowed to touch the high caste community and were required to stand a certain distance away from the higher castes. Around the 6th century, many individuals of the lower castes who were getting fed up of suppression turned to Buddhism. Buddhism actually began as a reaction to the violence of Hindu society, including the brutality of the caste system. Buddhism concentrates not on the society, but on the individual, thus separating religion from the interests of the ruling and dominance. In Buddhism, one is no longer born into a position due to past injustice. Although Buddhism does see life as pain and suffering and reincarnation as a renewal of this suffering, there is a potential escape. As mentioned before, many in India who were oppressed joined anti-Brahmanical movements in order to take a stance against the discriminatory acts they were facing. Even in 1950, one of the primary reasons for the conversion to Buddhism in India during the 1950s under the leadership of B.R. Ambedkar was the caste system and the plight of the oppressed "untouchables". Conversion to Buddhism seemed to be believed as the only means of emancipation from the injustices associated with the caste system. This is where the term Dalit derived from; those termed untouchables referred to themselves as the oppressed people, and the term is used to denote both pride in their community as well as resistance to exploitation. Sometime the oppressed Shudra castes and tribal groups also refer to themselves as Dalit. These Dalit activists rejected being defined as Hindus and supported the movement against social and economic injustice. It is unfortunate that although the original intent of Varnas was not to create caste, it has evolved into emphasizing the idea of the caste system. Varnas are conditioned with one's actions and desires based on Gunas, but people have mistaken Varnas for caste and treat them as identical. Varnas are God created, whereas caste is man-made; it is simply a social institution and can easily be changed and modified according to changing needs of society. Casteby-birth was never the original intent nor was it ever the basis upon which the Varnas were constituted; it was

term "Harijans" (God's people) to refer to the untouchables in order to encourage a shift towards positive attitude towards the lower castes. Many lower caste members, however, found the term to be patronizing. The Census of India had started by the British in the late 19th century, and in 1935, "the British Government of India came up with a list of 400 groups considered untouchable, as well as many tribal groups, that would be accorded special privileges in order to overcome deprivation and discrimination. Those groups included on this list came to be termed Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In the 1970s, however, many leaders of castes considered untouchable started calling themselves Dalits". The anti-caste Dalit movement began with Jyotirao Phule in the mid-19th century, and he started a movement for education and the upliftment of women, Shudra's, and Dalits, and the movement spread to many parts of India. He also worked to abolish the idea of "untouchability," which meant getting rid of restrictions on entry into temples, and finding a place for Dalits within Hinduism. After 1910, however, Dalit leaders started focusing on distancing themselves from Hinduism and began to advocate for a separate electorate for the Dalits. But Gandhi, who was one of the leaders of the Indian National Congress, tried to instead encourage the incorporation of Dalits as part of reformed Hinduism. Another prominent movement was the Dalit movement under B.R. Ambedkar, which began between the 1920s and 1930s. He campaigned for greater rights for Dalits in British India, and even after independence . Both Ambedkar and Gandhi were advocates for the abolishment of the caste system, but they disagreed on the means to go about it. Gandhi believed "untouchability to be a moral issue that could be abolished through goodwill and change of heart among the upper-caste Hindus".

Ambedkar, however, believed that "the subordination of Dalits was primarily economic and political, and could only be overcome by changing the social structure through legal, political, and educational means". Ambedkar did receive constitutional guarantees after independence that reserved a certain percentage of seats in elections for Dalits, but by the mid-1950s, Ambedkar was not satisfied by the rate of implementation of the measures. He therefore resigned from government and began to recruit Dalits to seek rights. In 1956, he encouraged around six million Dalits to convert to Buddhism "as a means of escaping the social stigma of untouchability within the Hindu caste system". During the 1970s, the Dalit Panthers movement sprouted up among the younger generation of Dalits along with other social movements in India, and their movement expressed their anger and frustration at the failure of implementation regarding policies that would eliminate acts of violence against Dalits by upper-caste Hindus in many parts of urban and rural India. There are three main categories of people that have been identified as eligible for preferential policies that reserve seats in legislatures, in government jobs, in public sector enterprises, and in state-supervised educational institutions, in terms of their population proportion in their area. They have also been promised special programs (such as health care legal assistance, allotment of land, scholarships, loans, and grants) and are legally protected against discrimination. The first group is the Scheduled Castes (SCs), which includes communities who are considered to be untouchables. The second are the Scheduled Tribes (STs). This category includes in it those communities who did not accept the caste system and preferred to reside deep in the jungles, forests, and mountains of India, away from the main population. The Scheduled Tribes are also called Adivasi, meaning aboriginals. The third is the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), which includes in it castes who belong to the Shudra Varna, former untouchables who converted from Hinduism to other religions, and nomads and tribes who made a living from criminal acts. They are considered to be affected by "backwardness" based on social and economic disadvantages. It is not clear, however, what criterion identifies OBCs and there is an ongoing disagreement over whether to assign people this status on the basis of caste or on economic criteria. The problem with this is that caste and economic status have been largely correlated in the past, and even now, caste-based prejudice and discrimination hinder economic advancement for the lower castes. In the 1960s, the reservation system for SCs and STs began, but the individual states were the ones that were to determine which would be identified as OBCs. Many southern states identified economically disadvantaged castes as OBCs, but there has been considerable opposition to implementing these policies in other Indian states. The Central Government appointed a commission headed by B.P. Mandal to look into the issue, and by 1978, the Mandal Commission report was completed. It was concluded that caste was the main contributing factor to social and economic backwardness. Many seats in state institutions were reserved for the three groups. The Commission recommended that 27 percent of seats be reserved for OBCs, in addition to 15 percent for SCs and 7 percent for STs . Unfortunately, the

not veer away from their caste-linked occupations, such as blacksmithing and pottery making. Many have now taken up newer occupations that do not relate to their caste, such as government jobs, teaching, retail and services, and machine repair. Wealth and power in the village is now less associated with caste than before, and landownership has become more diversified . Also, the idea that purity and pollution is caused by the lower castes has diminished a good amount. It has, however, only somewhat diminished in the public, whereas behind closed doors and on ceremonial occasions, purification rituals related to caste status are still observed. Endogamy is still enforced among families, but not as strict as before. A women's status is still significantly tied to the status of the male, but education and awareness of equalization for women has widely spread throughout India . In rural areas, movement out of caste specializing occupations and access to resources is still difficult and slow for the lower castes, but in urban areas, caste is now a less significant part of daily life. Although discrimination on the basis of caste has been outlawed in India, caste has become a means for competing for access to resources and power in modern India, such as educational opportunities, new occupations, and improvement in life chances . This trend is connected to India's preferential policies and the implementation of these policies. Implementation has been very uneven in the midst of debates and controversies over the preferential policies, but they have still had a very significant impact on many sections among the lower castes and classes . There has been an increase in representation of SCs, STs, and OBCs in elected offices and they have acquired strong local support. They have also become an important element in electoral politics and have gone on to form strong political parties in various regions. People from these disadvantaged groups have largely made their way into government jobs as well as all levels of educational institutions .Unfortunately, however, only a relatively small proportion of the lower castes have benefited from these preferential policies. Even thought there is an increasing acceptance of lower-caste individuals, there is also more overt hostility and violence expressed against the lower castes and classes in many parts of India. For example, in parts of Bihar, which is a state in eastern India, upper-caste landowners formed a private army in 1994 called the Ranvir Sena to "protect" themselves from the lower castes. Although this was outlawed, the Ranvir Sena had carried out 20 massacres of Dalits by early 1999 . Hostility is also expressed by the many people who support the removal of reserved government jobs and in institutions for technical education, particularly on the part of many from the traditionally higher castes who are economically disadvantaged. Individual achievements, merit, as well as economic position are also still significantly affected by caste.

Conclusion

The Indian caste system has played a significant role in shaping the occupations and roles as well as values of Indian society. Religion has been the constant push towards this stratification system for centuries, beginning with the Aryans and continuing down a long road of unfortunate discrimination, segregation, violence, and inequality. Hinduism was the backbone of the puritypollution complex, and it was the religion that influenced the daily lives and beliefs of the Indian people. Even after sixty-three years of independence, Indians continue to be in the grip of caste consciousness. Historically, India has been surviving as a nation for millennia with closed groups divided by caste, creed and language. Work was divided and each had his allotted task since birth, and heredity of occupation was a rule that played a big role in the economics of urban and rural life. Mobility of occupation or caste was restricted, and an individual leaving the occupation of his ancestors in order to follow his or her own path was rarely witnessed. It can be seen that caste continues to play an important role in the dynamic of social and political interactions within India. However, the relationship between caste and hereditary occupations has become less significant now, and there are fewer restrictions on social interaction among castes, especially in urban areas. The present Indian society is moving from its closed systems towards a state of change and progression marked by the assertion of the human spirit irrespective of castes and creeds. Numerous movements challenging the injustices associated with the caste system have encouraged individuals in India to be more civil towards other caste members. Many of the lower castes have gained a lot from the partial elimination of the caste system, and India should be applauded for its constant effort to eradicate this system of stratification from its culture. It is, however, important to look at the importance of how caste status has affected the quality of life and social mobility in India today
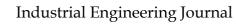
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